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*THE THEOLOGY OF WILLIAM NEWTON CLARKE*¹

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Fifteen years ago there appeared a volume of some four hundred pages, which bore the modest title, *An Outline of Christian Theology*. It had originally been prepared by the author, a professor in Hamilton Theological Seminary, for the use of his seminary classes, and, after circulating for some time in the form of typewritten notes, was privately printed for the greater convenience of the users. No attempt was made to advertise the book, but in due time it found its way into the hands of one and another who was interested in theological questions, and when in 1898 it was issued by the author through the ordinary channels, it received from the public an instant and hearty welcome.

Three qualities explain the success of Dr. Clarke's theology. In the first place, it was written in a clear and simple style. Technical theological terms were as far as possible avoided. While it gave evidence of wide and careful reading, there was no parade of learning. The author was evidently concerned to tell his story in the most direct fashion possible, and content to rely for his appeal upon the inherent interest of his subject-matter.

The spirit in which the book was written was moreover one of singular serenity. The author approached the vexed questions of theology with a quiet confidence which at once disarmed criticism and allayed fear. He contemplated the changes wrought in our view of the world by modern science with calmness, as if they were a matter of course. He was untroubled by biblical criticism. The theory of evolution was accepted without question; the traditional eschatology so courteously dismissed that one scarcely realized that it was gone. Where many writers, like the chief captain in Acts, had obtained their freedom with a great

¹ The Christian Doctrine of God, by William Newton Clarke, D.D. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1909.

price, Dr. Clarke wrote as one free born. He seemed as much at home spiritually in the modern world as he had been when a boy in his father's house.

And yet he was none the less Christian. Indeed, the striking thing about the book was its militant and aggressive Christianity. The author was evidently one who had communed deeply with Jesus, and had drawn from his communion convictions which had so laid hold upon his spirit as to demand utterance. He believed that the Gospel of Christ was a message which the world had not yet outgrown, and it was his endeavor to justify this faith by showing its adaptation to the present needs and problems of men.

A book which presents a positive message in a form which is at once lucid and convincing is sure to find readers, but these qualities alone would not have explained the success of Dr. Clarke's theology. It appeared at an opportune time and met a want which was widely felt by laymen as well as by ministers. Many who had broken intellectually with the doctrinal statements of the past still felt themselves at home emotionally in the religious values which they sought to express, and they welcomed this new statement of old truths because it made it possible for them to preserve their continuity with the Christian past, without the sacrifice of intellectual consistency. This fact gave the book a representative character. It was an index registering the presence of deep currents in the religious life of our time, and, as such, it deserves the attention of all who are interested in the study of contemporary religion.

In the present article we propose to review Dr. Clarke's theology with a view to discovering wherein its representative character consists. We shall take for the basis of our discussion his most recent book, the *Christian Doctrine of God*. In this closely printed octavo of some four hundred and seventy-five pages, he gives a systematic exposition of the fundamental principles of his theology. The same qualities which we noted in his earlier work reappear here. The book is at once lucid, modern, and Christian, but the treatment is fuller, and the reasoning more rigorous. Much that the earlier discussion implied is here fully developed. More than one untenable position has been abandoned. No recent book by an English-speaking theologian

reveals more clearly the prevailing tendency and controlling spirit of modern theological thought.

The aim which the author sets himself can be stated very simply. It is to present a conception of God which shall be at once Christian and credible. This is indeed no new thing; it is what Christian theology has always been attempting. The originality of Dr. Clarke's treatment consists in the way in which he solves his problem in detail.

In the first place, then, the idea of God which he presents is Christian. By this he means that it is consistent with the spirit and teaching of Jesus, the founder of Christianity. It is not an idea of God which we gain through modern science primarily and then baptize with the name Christian for the purpose of convenience. It is an idea which in its essential features grows out of the historic revelation recorded in the Bible and which, as such, can be scientifically defined and tested. A considerable part of Dr. Clarke's introduction is devoted to the study of the historic sources of the Christian doctrine, as they are found in Jesus' life and teaching. This does not mean that our author undertakes to reproduce Jesus' teaching concerning God in detail. Such an attempt, even if successful, would not accomplish the purpose which he has in mind, which is to present an idea of God which shall be intelligible to modern men. The language in which Jesus expressed his faith in God is very different from that of Dr. Clarke's theology. It is the language of popular religion, not of scientific thought. It has for its background the world-view of the older Judaism, a view in which the earth was regarded as the centre of the universe; where the existence of spirits, good and evil, was everywhere assumed; where human history was compressed within a few thousand years, and the final catastrophe with which it was to close was believed to be imminent. This view of the world necessarily affected Jesus' method of stating his doctrine; but it must not be identified with it. Jesus does not give us a metaphysical theory of God which stands or falls with a particular philosophy of the universe. He describes him in moral and religious terms, capable of application to very different intellectual surroundings and needing to be constantly reinterpreted, in view of the changes in contemporary science and

philosophy. Such an interpretation Dr. Clarke undertakes to give. "By the Christian doctrine of God," he tells us, "is meant, in the present discussion, the conception of God which Christian faith and thought propose for the present time, in view of the Bible and of history, and of all sound knowledge and experience, interpreted in the light of Jesus Christ, the revealer. It is a doctrine concerning which we can say at the point at which we now stand, that it is true if Jesus Christ does reveal God truly" (p. 4).

The position here assigned to Jesus illustrates a prevailing tendency in contemporary religious thought. In a sense far higher and truer than was the case with the older theology modern theology makes the person of Jesus normative for its thought of God. The old theology constructed its doctrine of Christ's person in the light of a preconceived conception of God. Jesus was two persons in one nature, a God who for the time had assumed the form of man, but whose real nature was unaffected thereby. Modern theology thinks of Jesus as a man, but a man through whom God's spirit has found such complete expression that it is possible to see in his character the perfect revelation of the heart of God. To believe in God, as modern theology conceives of him, means to extend throughout the range of universal experience that same gracious purpose and consistent character which Jesus has revealed within the conditions of a human life.

Two consequences follow from this principle. The first is, that theology must take its departure from the character of God rather than from those metaphysical attributes which express his relation to the universe, and which are therefore necessarily affected by changes in contemporary thought. The second is, that it must seek to conceive this character in a way that is consistent with the moral and religious teaching of Jesus.

Both these conclusions Dr. Clarke draws. Unlike the older theologians he begins his exposition of the idea of God by a description of his character, and then goes on to develop God's relation to men and to the universe. In his picture of the divine character he gives the central place to the qualities which Jesus himself made central in his own thought of God. Like Jesus he emphasizes the out-going love of God, the Father who is ever ready

to receive the prodigal, and whose gracious purpose anticipates the need of his children. Like Jesus, he emphasizes the extent of God's mercy, a mercy which reaches the outcasts whom the law has rejected, and finds more joy in the repentance of one sinner than in ninety and nine just persons who need no repentance. Like Jesus, finally, he emphasizes the consistency of God's character, the God who maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the unjust and the just.

I say, he emphasizes the consistency of God's character. It is at this point that his departure from the older theology appears most clearly. The terms which Dr. Clarke uses are those familiar to historic Christian theology, holiness, wisdom, and love, but the meaning which our author puts into them is in many respects new, and the relations which they sustain one to another have undergone significant change. To the older theology holiness and love represented independent elements in the divine nature, each requiring its own appropriate gratification. The former expressed the opposition of the righteous God to sinful man, an opposition which required the punishment of all unrepented sin; the latter expressed his gracious purpose to redeem his elect through the forgiveness of their sins. Here we have to do with two apparently inconsistent, if not contradictory, impulses, and the chief problem of the theologian was to discover the way in which this inconsistency could be overcome, and the love of God gratified, consistently with his holiness. This, as we all know, was accomplished through the atonement of Christ.

Dr. Clarke is conscious of no such problem. To him holiness denotes simply the moral excellence of God, and love is the method in which this moral excellence comes to its completest expression. There is no inconsistency between them, for there is no independent end which the holiness of God sets for itself, as distinct from his love. God is not holy when he punishes and loving when he forgives, as in the older Calvinism. God is holy in his love, and loving in his holiness. He is not gracious to some men and just to others, but always and everywhere both just and gracious. His attitude toward every man is that of the father in Jesus' parable of the prodigal. As man's father, truly akin to him in spirit, it

is his supreme desire to conform his child to himself, and this desire is the explanation of all that he does. Whether he punish or forgive, it is but a step in his supreme purpose of redemption.

This conception of God's character gives unity to Dr. Clarke's theology. It frees it from the inconsistency and exceptions which meet us so frequently in the theology of the past. The dualism which was so characteristic a feature of the older Calvinism, and which expressed itself in the contrast between reason and revelation, nature and the supernatural, law and grace, has disappeared for Dr. Clarke. To him revelation is not the disclosure of an aspect of God's character, otherwise unknowable, but only the clearer manifestation of that which God has always been and of which, from the first, men have had more or less clear anticipations. As a spiritual being, man is fitted by nature to receive the divine revelation. Revelation is not the impartation by supernatural process of mysteries transcending the reason of man; it is the manifestation of spirit to spirit, and the recipient recognizes in the disclosure which comes to him from God not simply the revelation of the divine nature, but also the complete satisfaction of ideals of which he has long been conscious within himself. As the book which gives us the revelation of Jesus, the ideal man, God's complete self-manifestation in humanity, the Bible is indeed a unique book. But it is not God's first or only revelation, even on the side of God's love. From the beginning God has written his gracious purpose in the heart of man, and the disclosure which he has made of himself in Christ is recognized by those to whom it comes as the fulfilment of their own inner prophecy.

Redemption, in like manner, is not to be conceived as an exception to God's ordinary working, but rather as the normal method of his activity. It is not confined to a group, larger or smaller, whom God has arbitrarily chosen from the rest, that he may make them the subjects of his redemptive activity, but concerns all mankind alike, though in different order and degree. All history is part of a single process, in which God is training men for membership in his kingdom. In other words, all history is the history of redemption. Dr. Clarke does not indeed explicitly state that all individuals will be saved, but that is

the natural implication of his discussion. If any one is lost, it will be because of his own free choice. But the libertarian limitation which alone can avoid the conclusion of universalism is unacceptable to the author. Hard as it may be for us to understand, man's freedom must somehow be consistent with the divine determination. By moral means, to be sure, yet in the end, God must control, and we may be certain that he will have his way with every child of man.

This desire for ethical consistency appears instructively in Dr. Clarke's treatment of the trinity. To the older Protestantism, as is well known, the trinity had to do with inner distinctions in the nature of God himself, distinctions rendered necessary in order to overcome the fundamental ethical dualism to which we have already referred. According to Calvin, God is able to harmonize the conflict of the claims of justice and mercy in his own character, because as the second person of the trinity, the representative of mercy, he is able to bear the penalty inflicted by himself as the first person, the representative of justice. These ontological distinctions have lost their meaning for our author. The trinity is a truth of the Christian experience. The distinctions with which it deals concern man rather than God. They express different aspects in which God manifests himself to us as we contemplate the different phases of his redemptive activity. He manifests himself in the order of nature, the natural processes which are the necessary presuppositions of the religious experience. He manifests himself in historical revelation and supremely in the person of Jesus Christ, our Lord. He manifests himself, finally, in that personal experience through which we apprehend Jesus as the revelation of the God of all the world. Here we have three types of religion which correspond in a measure to the three historic doctrines: natural religion, "or the religion of God as he is known in the order of the world; historical religion, or religion which finds its support in the historical manifestations of God in events of time; personal religion, spiritual, experimental, mystical, that knows God in the soul" (p. 247). In all three aspects, it is the same gracious God who is revealed. The tragic contrast between the demand of justice and the appeal of mercy, which gives

dramatic interest to the older doctrine, has completely disappeared.

Such, then, is Dr. Clarke's God, a God ethically consistent in all that he does, committed with all the intensity of his moral nature to the redemptive purpose which Jesus has revealed, and strong enough and wise enough to insure the realization of this purpose in spite of every obstacle.

I say strong enough to insure the realization of his purpose in spite of every obstacle. With this we touch a second aspect of Dr. Clarke's view, which needs emphasis, namely, the fact that he attributes to this idea of God universal validity. According to our author Jesus' God is the God of the universe. When we raise philosophy's ancient question as to the ultimate explanation of the varied phenomena of the world, we find the only satisfying answer in the Christian idea of God. The so-called metaphysical attributes of God—infinity, eternity, omnipresence, and the like—are only so many different ways of asserting this simple truth.

Dr. Clarke's proof of this thesis occupies the last two sections of his book. The first, which treats of God and the universe, is expository in nature. It explains in detail what is the relation between God and the world which Christian faith assumes. The second gives the reason for believing that this faith is justified in fact.

It is not possible for us to follow the argument in detail. In substance, it reduces to this, that the qualities which we find essential in the Christian idea of God are so inwrought into the structure of the universe that it is natural to assume that it has the Christian God for its author. The universe is not something alien to man with which he connects himself, as if it were an existence of a different kind. "The human race is part and parcel of the universe, for it has grown up out of the life which was before it on the earth. . . . We have to do not with a late born race planted from the outside in a little world, but an ancient race which is of one substance with the universe, while its true life is in the powers of the spirit which reach out to that which is above" (p. 371). "It is plain that if this conception of the relation between man and the world be true, no partial idea of

God can satisfy humanity. We cannot think of him except as universal in his relations. He must be one God equally related to all souls and to all existences" (*ibid.*). Clearly, then, if the Christian idea of God be true, we should expect to find evidence for it not only in the spiritual nature of man, but in the universe, which is at once its home and its school.

Such evidence Dr. Clarke believes that we find. It is of two kinds, rational and spiritual. The former consists in the response which the universe makes to our efforts at rational explanation. The second, in the satisfaction which it yields to the demands of our moral and religious nature.

These arguments have a familiar sound. They seem to be only the well-known teleological and moral arguments in a new dress. But closer examination shows that this is only in part true. The older theologians used the evidence from design and the argument from conscience to establish the existence of a rational and a moral God, but they were persuaded that these arguments alone were inadequate to establish faith in a God of love; hence they supplemented the rational arguments by supernatural revelation. The dualism already referred to in connection with the idea of God reappears in the proof of his existence. Dr. Clarke, as we have seen, is unwilling to accept this limitation. Since the God in whom he believes is everywhere loving as well as holy, we should expect to find evidence of his love wherever his activity extends, and this Dr. Clarke believes to be the case. The argument from reason does not lead us to the door of Christianity and then stop; it is valid all along the line. The demand which we find within ourselves for a rational explanation of things finds its satisfaction only in the kind of God that Jesus Christ reveals. When we have come to think of God as Jesus did, and turn back to the universe, we find that all its elements fall into place as parts of the consistent plan, and mysteries which would otherwise baffle our reason find in him their solution.

The uniformity of nature, with its results in undeserved suffering becomes the means which the Father uses for the training of his children in courage and faith. The spiritual aspirations of man which seem so often in irreconcilable conflict with reality

are to the Christian evidences of a divine sonship which finds in God, and in God alone, its complete satisfaction. So the Christian idea of God proves everywhere a unifying conception. It harmonizes all the unrelated elements in our thinking and in our feeling. It gives us, for the first time, a consistent universe, and there is no other idea which does this with the same success.

Here, too, the position taken by Dr. Clarke is typical. In rejecting the dualism of the older apology, and relying for his proof of the Christian God upon evidence similar in kind to that of which we make use in other fields of experience, he is in touch with the prevailing spirit in contemporary theology.

But at this point our author is confronted with the fact of evil, that baffling and mysterious experience which has made shipwreck of so many philosophies. The test of every theology is its treatment of this problem, and Dr. Clarke's method is characteristic of the man. There are three possible attitudes which one may take to the problem of evil, no one of which satisfies our author. One may minimize its importance, question the account which it gives of itself, explain away its apparent harshness and cruelty, cloak its seeming vice in the garb of an unsuspected virtue, and thus by a process of ingenious reinterpretation bow it politely out of the world. Or one may recognize evil for what it seems to be, something real and terrible, and account for its existence through the hypothesis of a rival power, limiting and—to a greater or less degree—thwarting the purpose of a good God. Or, finally, still taking it at its face-value, one may yet subject it to God's power and find place for it within his purpose. This was the method taken by the older Calvinism. Calvinism, as is well known, saw in sin the means through which God's justice found an expression possible in no other way, and because the manifestation of justice was inherently excellent, whatever was necessary to make this manifestation possible could be ethically justified. This is the philosophy of Jonathan Edwards's famous sermon on "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

No one of these solutions satisfies our author. Evil in each one of its three great forms, pain, sin, and death, is to him some-

thing real and terrible, something to be shunned and fought and ultimately overcome, but it is not independent of God, nor an intruder in the universe which he has made. Evil is a part of the structure of the world. It is inwrought into the nature of things. It will have its place in the life to come, as well as the life here, for it is here with a purpose, and, as the older Calvinism rightly affirms, it ministers to the glory of God. But the purpose, as Dr. Clarke conceives it, is very different from that discovered by Jonathan Edwards. It is a purpose of redemption. Evil is here because without it man cannot be trained in the highest moral excellence. A world in which evil had intruded against the will of God would be intolerable to Christian faith, but a world in which God uses evil for his wise and beneficent purpose is a world in which the Christian can feel at home. Our difficulty consists in the fact that the training is so incomplete. There is so much evil which seems to yield no outcome in character. If every cross were a Calvary, the burden would be lightened, for we should see then what we only suspect now, the end which it is designed to serve. "If we could confidently include the vast movement of sin between a Godworthy origin and a Godworthy outcome we might still sadly wonder on the way, but we could rest in hope" (p. 461).

It is at this point that Dr. Clarke's position is most certain to be attacked. Most readers will be ready to admit that the idea of God which our author presents is Christian in the sense in which he makes the claim. The difficulty arises when we attempt to reconcile the idea of such a God with the facts of life as we find them. Those who demand logical demonstration before they are ready to believe will naturally find the evidence for Dr. Clarke's thesis unconvincing. Calvin's doctrine of God was easy by comparison. He saw all things in the world tending to a double issue, and he affirmed what he saw to be final truth. But to believe that our entire universe, filled as it is with countless miseries, with ruthless cruelties, with diabolical perversities, is really under the control of a being in character like Jesus; that this supreme power will some day guide it to an end which is good; that some day all mankind shall be organized into one great brotherhood; that service shall be the universal

law, and ministry the test of greatness,—this is indeed to make an heroic venture of faith. “Dr. Clarke,” caustically remarks a recent reviewer, “has succeeded in drawing a picture of God to which we feel no moral repugnance. But there is one most important attribute which he has omitted from the sketch, and that is the attribute of non-existence. Experience of the world does not lend the slightest plausibility to the theistic hypothesis as to its origin.”

Such an objection altogether misconceives the kind of evidence upon which religion relies for its proof. Religion is the child of faith, and faith is never confined to the present. It reaches out for that which is not yet, and affirms that it shall yet be true. Heroism is its native atmosphere, adventure its vital breath. To believe in God means everywhere and always to identify one's own highest ideal with ultimate reality. It means to rise above sense to the spirit, which is only in part revealed through it, and to be persuaded that this partial revelation shall some day be complete. Every man who has really believed in God has made such a venture. He has assumed the reality of the ideal and lived in anticipation of a future only in part revealed. He has dared to believe that the world that now presents only the raw material of goodness and truth shall become a fit habitation for reasonable and moral beings. He has done it because he could not help it, because without such an assumption life would not have seemed worth living, and because, when it was made, facts otherwise inexplicable fitted into place and the world became unified and consistent.

Is it reasonable to do this? From the individual point of view it is certainly most reasonable. Those who, like our author, hold the Christian idea of God because it satisfies the deepest needs of their own souls have no option but to assert its ultimate validity. Such a faith brings harmony into life where it would otherwise be discordant by promising ultimate victory to those ideals which seem supremely worthful. It assures those who are giving their lives to ministry to human need in all its various forms that their labors will not be wasted or their energies mispent. If the Calvinistic idea of God satisfied those who held it, it was because the age in which they lived was an age of bat-

tle, when men were on trial for their lives and for that which they held dearer than life, the truth of God. If this idea no longer satisfies us, it is because other virtues hold a more prominent place in our horizon. Our ideal is one of peace, not of war. We are less concerned to conserve than to impart, and the God who cares for the downcast and oppressed of every race and tribe is the only God who can satisfy an age which has witnessed the birth of modern philanthropy and of modern missions.

Are we, then, shut up to purely subjective evidence? Can nothing be said for this idea of God but that it satisfies the individual need? Is there no objective standard by which it can be judged, no social argument in favor of its validity?

The missionary activity of the Christian church is the best answer to this question. It is the expression of the conviction held by every sincere Christian that the response which the Christian idea of God calls forth in his own soul is not a purely individual matter, but is the answer to common social needs which can find their satisfaction in no other way. To the extent to which this faith shall prove justified in fact, the weight of the argument for the Christian God will be transferred from the experience of the individual to that of the race.

For those who look at the subject from this point of view there is much in the outlook that is encouraging. In spite of all that is dark and selfish in human life, it is yet a fact that the altruistic virtues are being more and more developed, and the ideals of war yielding place to those of peace. The Christian message of brotherhood and service is, as a matter of fact, finding response in the hearts of men. The very dissatisfaction that we feel at our shortcomings, the seriousness of the criticism to which our social order is being subjected, is the best evidence of the fact that the old selfish and particularistic ideals of an earlier age no longer satisfy us. The subjective response which the Christian idea of God calls forth in individuals is itself the result and evidence of a far-reaching social change which constitutes no small argument for its objective validity. It is, of course, always possible that this faith may prove mistaken. It is possible that Calvinism is right in its conception of a divided universe, and that we may be obliged to renounce as an idle dream our faith in the

good God whose love embraces every child of man. But, if this be true, it will introduce an irreconcilable discord into our inner life. If our ideals are to be justified in the real world, it can only be through the Christian idea of God. It is reasonable, therefore, in default of convincing evidence to the contrary, to act as if it were true.

And when we decide so to act, we find that reality answers our expectation. It is not simply that we ourselves find satisfaction in our faith, although that is true, but that the action which results from that faith changes the social environment for the better. Every man who believes in the Christ-like God and who acts out his conviction is increasing the amount of altruism in the world and making faith in such a God easier to those who have not yet believed. In other words, he is increasing the sum total of evidence in favor of the truth of the Christian view.